



The Alabama Veteran

"Proudly Serving America's Finest"

VOL. 3 - ED. 1

WINTER 2008

IMPORTANT DATES

- **February 14 - Valentine's Day**
- **February 18 - President's Day**
- **March 9 - Daylight Savings Time Starts**
- **March 23 - Easter**
- **April 21-24 - ADVA Training Conference**

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Site approved for fourth veterans home

A vision for a fourth veterans home in Alabama is closer to reality after the Alabama Board of Veterans Affairs approved a site in Pell City for the home at a Jan. 11th board meeting.

"This is a great day for Alabama veterans," said Ken Rollins, chairman of the Veterans Home Committee. Rollins and other committee members recommended the site to the state VA board after considering proposals in Shelby and St. Clair Counties.

St. Clair County and Pell City officials outlined a comprehensive plan that would include the veterans home in a 160-acre health and education campus. The campus would include a new St. Vincent Hospital, a physicians' office complex, and a nursing school.

The site is in proximity to the Jefferson State Community College.

"The veterans home will be a state-of-the-

art facility that will take us through the next 20 or 30 years," said Clyde Marsh, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs.

The home will be a 280-bed facility with 50 beds for Alzheimer's patients, and 50 domiciliary units for residents with minimal care needs. The design will also allow for long-term care for the growing population of female veterans in the state.

The cost of the home is estimated at \$40 million, with federal funds covering 65% of the cost. State matching funds will come from the Alabama Veterans Assistance Fund.

Construction of the home should begin in 2009 and be completed sometime in 2011, if the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs supports the priority of the home, and if Congress allocates federal funding in FY09.

Some 450 veterans reside at Alabama's three veterans homes in Huntsville, Alexander City and Bay Minette.

ADVA will introduce bill to increase education benefits for dependents of disabled veterans

Dependents of veterans could gain extra college benefits if ADVA is successful in getting an education bill passed in the upcoming legislative session.

The Alabama G.I. Dependents' Scholarship Program currently pays for four standard academic years (12 quarters or 8 semesters) for chil-

dren of veterans who have a 20% or more disability rating.

A spouse, or unmarried widow or widower of a veteran rated 20% to 90% is entitled to two standard academic years (6 quarters or 4 semesters). If the bill passes, the scholarship will increase from 8 to 10 semesters for depend-

ent children, and from 4 to 6 semesters for spouses.

The scholarship covers tuition, books and fees.

For more information about the Alabama G.I. Dependent Scholarship Program, visit the ADVA website at www.va.state.al.us, or call (334) 242-5077.



Commissioner's Corner

W. Clyde Marsh

I extend greetings to all as we enter into an exciting new year of activities for veterans. Although our military men and women are in harms way on distant shores, we are focused on supporting them on the home front. The ADVA is on the front lines along with other state and federal agencies working on sustaining active duty and retired veterans' benefits. We want to ensure that veterans, as well as their eligible dependants, qualify for and receive all benefits to which they are entitled. Our great state of Alabama is a very veteran friendly state, and is working diligently to provide additional benefits to veterans.

One of our major priorities for 2008 is extending education benefits for widows and orphans, as well as disabled veterans. Another major priority is enhancing the long-term care for our aging veteran population in Alabama. To this end, the ADVA will be promoting the increase of tuition and fees from eight to ten semesters for dependants, and from four to six semesters for spouses of veterans with a 20% or greater disability, respectively. The ADVA is moving forward with plans to construct a new state veterans' home which will be the state's fourth home. Alabama veterans' homes represent a key pillar in our state's long-term veterans' care program. I would be remiss if I did not applaud the heavy lifting done by our State Board of Veterans Affairs in selecting our new veterans' home site and authorizing our state matching funds needed to move this important project forward.

I have met with state senators and representatives regarding our veteran priorities, and I can report that the department's initiatives to extend education benefits and to provide additional long-term care for our veterans have received legislative support. Both ADVA priorities for 2008 will be introduced to the state legislature in the upcoming legislative session.

I would like to acknowledge the sustained dedicated service of Edsel Bonds who retired in December 2007 following 38 years of service to veterans and this agency. Additionally, I want to acknowledge Harold Taylor who also retired in December 2007 following 36 years of dedicated service to Alabama veterans. These advocates served as veterans service officers early in their careers and later as district managers. The ADVA thanks them for their contributions to the department, and the veterans of Alabama appreciate their monumental efforts. Our hats are off to them, and we wish them all the best in their current retirement.

Over the past few months, the ADVA has undergone a few personnel changes as well. James Manning will be moving to the Claims Division as Claims Reviewer; Mr. Rick Vaughan will remain as VSO in the Etowah County Office for the near term; and Robert Horton came aboard as the ADVA PIO following his retirement from the Alabama National Guard after 24 years of dedicated service in uniform. Our newest employee is Mrs. Sandra Speakman who recently filled the position of ADVA Legal Counsel. Mrs. Speakman comes to our agency from the Personnel Department where she served as Assistant Attorney General for the past three years. She previously served in the Attorney Generals Office as Assistant Attorney General, Constitutional Defense Division.

I want to express my appreciation to all of you who serve our veterans and their families. Whether you are in a supervisory role, providing administrative support, or directly helping veterans with claims, your job is important to this department. I commend all of you and encourage you to continue providing the same quality service to our deserving veterans in the upcoming year. I am truly excited about the possibility of improving Alabama Veterans benefits and assisting veterans to obtain current benefits and services. I am counting on you to help make this happen. Remember, "Doing the right thing is always the right thing to do, and I consider every day to be Veterans Day".

Around the State

Supermarket of Veterans Benefits a hit in Huntsville



A veteran has his blood pressure checked at the Supermarket of Benefits

Huntsville—Before the doors opened for business, customers were lining up for the second annual Supermarket of Veterans Benefits held Dec. 13 at the Madison Square Mall in Hunts-

ville. State and federal agencies and other veterans service organizations were on hand to provide information about benefits and services to the over 600 veterans that turned out for the event.

The Supermarket of Veterans Benefits is a way for the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs to reach out and help veterans gain information about their entitlements.

Vietnam veteran Joseph Cassoni has never signed up for VA benefits, but at 63 he wanted to check into medical and educational benefits. "I knew they were available and I could take advantage of them, but I just didn't have time to look into it, said Cassoni.

In addition to the "Supermarkets", veterans can contact their county veterans service office for information about VA benefits and services. The state VA offices are listed at www.va.state.al.us/vso.htm.

The Redstone Rocket contributed to this article.

The American Village is site for National Cemetery

MONTEVALLO—Congress has approved federal funding for a national veterans cemetery at The American Village in Montevallo.

The U.S. House of Representatives allotted \$18.5 million for construction of the cemetery in the new federal budget approved in December.

"This keeps a promise we made to veterans in Alabama and their loved ones that there will be a fitting final resting place for those who have served our state with such honor," said Congressman Spencer Bachus.

"As construction begins, I think everyone will see how beautiful a site this is. It will truly show the appreciation we have for the veterans who have defended our freedom."

In 2003, Congress asked the VA to build a new cemetery in the Birmingham area, which has more than 210,000 veterans.

The cemetery remains on schedule to open in the fall of 2008.

"This keeps a promise we made to veterans in Alabama and their loved ones..."
Congressman Spencer Bachus

Group raises money to build home for wounded Marine

IRVINGTON (AP) - Two Black Hawk helicopters hovered and tipped rotors to honor Marine Sgt. Greg Edwards at a Jan. 25 ceremony to start building a specially adapted home for the Edwards family.

Edwards, 25, on his third tour in Iraq, lost both legs and shattered his left hand in an explosion while on patrol in Ramadi.

The Tauton, Mass.-based Homes for Our Troops led a successful campaign to raise funds to build the home for Edwards, who is married with two young daughters. The home will be on five acres next to a peanut field in south Mobile County. His parents, Cheryl and David Edwards, live nearby.

"I'm excited and appreciative of all that's been done for me," said Edwards.

Edwards, who enlisted at age 17, moved back to Irvington, Ala. last month, hoping eventually to enroll at the University of South Alabama once the family is resettled.

The family had been living near Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington during his recovery. He has endured 37 surgeries and will continue outpatient care at nearby Veterans Affairs hospitals.

His mother said Edwards hasn't let his injuries get him down.

"He would go back (to Iraq) if he could," she said.

With a big grin, Edwards said it's time to move out of his parents' home because they are spoiling his children.

General contractor Rod Cook said the home could be built in six months, weather permitting. His company, RCCI Inc., will build the house with a design specially adapted for use by a person with severe disabilities.

Homes for Our Troops has completed 22 home projects in nine states and has 20 more under construction in 14 states.



Joe Fell, commandant of the Wilson Detachment of the Marine Corps League, congratulates Marine Sgt. Greg Edwards on his future home in Irvington. - Bill Starling (AP)

Around the State

Airmen brighten veterans' Christmas

During the holidays, enlisted Airmen made many of the wishes of veterans at the Bill Nichols State Home come true.

Many of those wishes were as simple as a new pair of socks and a fruit basket, but some were a little bigger.

"It's a big surprise," said 92-year-old Phil Marcoux. The retired, sailor served during World War II and the Korean War.

Marcoux received a bundle of clothes, a warm hat, a book on trains and a locomotive made of wood.

"My whole family worked on trains. I'm the only one who didn't work on trains," he said. The gifts



Tech Sgt. Natasha Pearson, right, reads a Christmas card to James English, left, at the Bill Nichols State Veterans Home in Alexander City.

were delivered by the Maxwell-Gunter Junior Enlisted Advisory Council. Tech. Sgt. Natasha Pearson, council

president, and about 20 others spent about two hours going floor-to-floor and room-to-room delivering the gifts.

This was the second year the council has collected and delivered gifts to the veterans home.

It's an idea that came out of the council's quarterly visits to the facility.

The activities coordinator at Bill Nichols collected wish lists from residents and sent them to the council.

"We tried to get at least one thing from their wish list to make their holiday a little bit better," Pearson said.

The Montgomery Advertiser contributed this story and photo.



Maj. Gen. Abner Blalock (left), and Commissioner Clyde Marsh (right) place a wreath during the Wreaths Across America ceremony.

Wreaths Across America honors Alabama Veterans

An inaugural Wreaths Across America ceremony was held at the State Capitol on Dec. 10 to honor Alabama veterans—past and present.

Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner Clyde Marsh joined Maj. Gen. Abner Blalock, adjutant general of the Alabama National Guard, to pay special tribute to servicemembers that are serving today in uniform; veterans that have served in the past; and to those veterans who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation's freedom.

Ceremonies were held at state capitols and national cemeteries with volunteers laying some 10,000 wreaths at Arlington National Cemetery during this year's Wreaths Across America.

Program honors service

Nearly 100 Alabamians have been killed while serving their country since 9/11, and they have not been forgotten.

Their memories are being kept alive by the Blue Star Salute Program, which honors their service in battle as well as non-combat situations.

Photographs of the service members were displayed during the American Legion's mid-winter conference held in Montgomery Jan. 18-21.

Blue Star spokesman Bill Wyatt said the Blue Star program began during World War I, but discontinued until four years ago. According to Wyatt, Alabama has one of the largest Blue Star Salute programs in the country.

During World War I, relatives of troops who were serving sketched a blue star onto a white pillowcase and displayed it in the front window of their homes. When a loved one was killed, the blue star was replaced by a gold star so that neighbors could see that the supreme sacrifice had been made.

Gov. Bob Riley signed a proclamation that encouraged Alabamians to "symbolically unite hands and hearts with communities across America in a united Blue Star salute that recognizes and honors our military service members and their families".

Membership in the Blue Star Salute Program is open to the public. For more information about the program, visit www.bluestarsalute.org.



Bill Wyatt holds a photo of a fallen Alabama Soldier.

The Montgomery Advertiser contributed to this story and photo.

News to Use

Omnibus Bill includes funding for veterans' benefits and health care

WASHINGTON – On December 26, President Bush signed into law H.R. 2764 that will include funding for veterans' benefits and health care in 2008.

H.R. 2764, otherwise known as the Foreign Operations/Consolidated Appropriations Bill, will provide a substantial increase for VA. Lawmakers designated an extra \$3.7 billion above the President's budget request as 'contingent emergency' funding. In a letter to Congress on Jan. 17, the President requested and designated the emergency funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The bill will provide a record \$43.1 billion in discretionary funding for healthcare, claims processing, personnel, construction, maintenance and other associated expenses. The bill will also provide \$124 million for VA to hire 1000 or more additional employees to bolster its compensation and pension claims processing system. In recent years, VA has struggled to reduce an ever increasing backlog of pending claims.

Additionally, the bill will provide \$37.2 billion to the Veterans Health Administration, \$4.5 billion over 2007 for veterans' medical care. VA estimates it will treat more than 5.8 million patients in 2008 - 54,000 more than fiscal year 2007.

VA sets up Suicide Crisis Hot Line

To ensure veterans with mental health crises have immediate access to trained coordinators, the Department of Veterans Affairs has a 24-hour, national suicide prevention hot line.

The hot line is based at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center in New York state.

Additionally, in June the VA announced it will hire 100 new employees to provide readjustment counseling at each of its 207 community based centers.

The VA Suicide Crisis number is 1-800-273-TALK.

Payments to disabled veterans ruled tax free

WASHINGTON - Payments provided to veterans under two specific programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) - the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) and Incentive Therapy (IT) programs - are no longer taxable, according to the Internal Revenue Service. Veterans who paid tax on these benefits in the past three years can claim refunds.

Recipients of CWT and IT payments no longer receive a Form 1099 (Miscellaneous Income) from VA. Veterans who paid tax on these benefits in tax years 2004, 2005 or 2006 can claim a refund by filing an amended tax return using IRS Form 1040X. Nearly 19,000 veterans received CWT benefits last year, while 8,500 received IT benefits.

The IRS agreed with a U.S. Tax Court decision earlier in 2007 that CWT payments are tax-free veterans benefits. In so doing, the agency reversed a 1965 ruling that these payments were taxable and required VA to report payments as taxable income.

The CWT and IT programs provide assistance to veterans unable to work and support themselves. Under the CWT program, VA contracts with private industry and the public sector for work by veterans, who learn new job skills, strengthen successful work habits and regain a sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Veterans are compensated by VA for their work and, in turn, improve their economic and social well-being.

Under the IT program, seriously disabled veterans receive payments for providing services at about 70 VA medical centers.

New law allows multiple grants for Disabled Veterans

A change in federal law allows certain seriously injured veterans and servicemembers to receive multiple grants for constructing or modifying their homes.

Before the change, eligible veterans and servicemembers could receive special adaptive housing grants of \$10,000 or \$50,000 from VA only once.

Now, veterans may use the benefit up to three times, so long as the total grants stay within specified limits outlined in the law. For more information about grants and other adaptive housing programs, contact the Alabama VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000.

News to Use

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATE COMMISSIONER

W. Clyde Marsh
Brenda Ingram—Executive Assistant

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONERS

Michael E. Northcutt
Willie E. Moore

VETERANS HOMES COORDINATOR

Kim Justice

GENERAL COUNSEL

Sandra Speakman

CLAIMS

William Rumph—Director of Claims

BUDGET / FINANCE

June Rogers—Senior Accountant
Dixie Black—Senior Accountant
Carol Cochran—Accounting Technician

TRAINING

Mark Sullivan—Training Manager

LOCATION

RSA Plaza
770 Washington Avenue
Suite 530
Montgomery, Alabama 36104
Telephone: (334) 242-5077
Fax: (334) 242-5102

MAILING ADDRESS

Department of Veterans Affairs
PO Box 1509
Montgomery, Alabama 36102-1509

INTERNET WEB ADDRESS

www.va.state.al.us

Comments concerning this publication or its contents
may be directed to the attention of:

Robert Horton
Public Information Officer
E-mail: robert.horton@va.alabama.gov

Power of Attorney important to veterans' claims

No two veterans' claims are alike, but all claims require a power of attorney whether it's filed through the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs, or another veterans' service organization in the state.

It is important for veterans to understand the purpose of the power of attorney and how it applies to their claim. Veterans should be aware that the organization or agency that has power of attorney will exclusively handle all matters pertaining to the claim.

A veteran can execute the power of attorney on either the Department of Veterans Affairs Form 21-22 (Appointment of Veterans Service Organization as Claimant's Representative), or on the Department of Veterans Affairs Form 22a (Appointment of Attorney or Agent as Claimant's Representative).

The veteran can appoint either an ADVA veterans service officer, or a service organization to represent, prepare, present and prosecute their claim. If the veterans appoints a veterans' service organization with power of attorney that is not represented by ADVA, the state VA cannot legally access the veteran's claim information, or serve as the veteran's official representative in the claim process. Additionally, a veteran's membership in a service organization is not a prerequisite for them to receive assistance from ADVA.

The American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Veterans of Foreign Wars are examples of legitimate service organizations that can assist veterans with their claims.

Whether the veteran files his or her claim through ADVA, or with a veterans' service organization, one important step in the claim process is initiating a power of attorney, and understanding its purpose.

For questions about power of attorney, contact the ADVA Claims Division at (334) 213-3320.

National VA Update

Peake sworn in as VA Secretary

WASHINGTON—Dr. James B. Peake, a combat Vietnam veteran and former Army Surgeon General, was sworn in by President George W. Bush as the nation's sixth VA Secretary on Dec. 20.

"Dr. Peake takes office at a critical moment in the history of this Department," said President Bush. "Our nation is at war—and many new veterans are leaving the battlefield and entering the VA system. This system provides our veterans with the finest care—but the bureaucracy can be difficult to navigate."

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Peake assumes leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the second largest cabinet department, with about 250,000 employees and a \$82 billion budget.

Committee on Women Veterans has new members

WASHINGTON—Four new members have been appointed to the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), an expert panel that advises VA on issues and programs affecting women veterans.

"I am pleased to welcome the newest members of this committee to the important job of serving America's women veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake. "Members of this committee work tirelessly on behalf of women veterans to improve outreach, ensure access to VA benefits and recommend ways in which VA can better meet their needs."

Established in 1983, the advisory committee makes recommendations for administrative and legislative changes. The committee members are appointed to one-, two-, or three-year terms. The new committee members include: Rene A. Campos from Washington, D.C.; Helena R. Carapellatti from Upper Marlboro, Md; Barbara Pittman from Washington, D.C.; and Rosemarie (Rose) Weber from Springfield, Va.

Women veterans are one of the fastest growing segments of the veteran population. There are approximately 1.7 million women veterans. They comprise 7 percent of the total veteran population and nearly 5 percent of all veterans who use VA health care services. VA estimates that by 2020 women veterans will comprise 10 percent of the veteran population.

ALABAMA BOARD OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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Ken Rollins—Dep. Vice Chairman
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American Ex-Prisoners of War

Robert Baker—Selma

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Disabled American Veterans

James Graves-Vinemont
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Chad Richmond—Pinson

Veterans of Foreign Wars

Roland Day—Birmingham
Wayne Dial—Talladega
Joe McDonald—Birmingham
Charles Stephens—Fort Payne

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Robert J. "Bob" Hewitt—Blountsville

Vietnam Veterans of America

Ken Rollins—Oxford

National VA Update

New Scholarship supplements GI Bill

The Fund for Veterans' Education unveiled its first crop of scholarship recipients this fall and announced that it will accept more applications for the need-based program meant to help veterans pay for a college education.

The scholarship is intended to cover the cost of college that the G.I. Bill cannot pay and it is available to veterans of all branches of the United States Armed Forces who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Fund for Veterans' Education founder, Jerome Kohlberg, has committed \$4 million to get the scholarship started. Some 96 scholarships worth \$400,000 have been awarded. The scholarships pay the difference between total tuition and available assistance such as GI Bill payments and grants. Scholarship America administers the program.

For more information about the Fund for Veterans' Education, visit www.veteransfund.org/apply.php.

Bill emphasizes care for female veterans

A veterans' health care bill introduced in the House of Representatives is aimed at expanding treatment and counseling for female veterans—especially the almost 200,000 military women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The bill would order joint Pentagon and Department of Veterans Affairs studies of deployments' long-term health effects on women; expand veterans' counseling programs to put more emphasis on treatment of sexual trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder among women; and create a pilot program to provide child care for women while they are being treated at VA facilities.

More than 180,000 women from all service components have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. A total of 81 female service members have died while supporting military operations in theater.

The bill, Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act, is endorsed by Disabled American Veterans.

Proposed higher fees for healthcare

A Pentagon task force says the future of the military health care system depends on charging higher fees for military families, retirees and retiree families.

A report issued by Task Force on the Future of Military Health Care calls for an increase in pharmacy co-payments and in Tricare enrollment fees, deductibles and co-payments.

Under the proposal for example, fees for getting a 30-day supply of prescription drugs at a retail pharmacy is currently \$3 for generics, \$9 for approved brand-name drugs and \$22 for non-approved drugs— would increase to \$22, \$25 and \$45, respectively.

Pharmacy increases would apply to reservists, their families and military retirees covered by the Tricare Standard.

Increased enrollment fees for all Tricare coverage plans would be phased in over a four-year period.

The task force's proposal will require Pentagon and congressional approval.



Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs
RSA Plaza Building
770 Washington Ave, Suite 530
P.O. Box 1509
Montgomery, Alabama 36102-1509

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